



The Culinary Revolution of Underground Supper Clubs

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Culinary thrills run the gamut from tasting a witchetty grub, the plump, soft protein-packed larva of Central Australia, to crunching a croquembouche. French for "crisp in mouth" the treat is a tower of caramel-coated, custard-filled creampuffs, called profiteroles, wreathed in spun sugar. If your sense of adventure falls somewhere in between eating the objectionable and getting an epic sugar-high then underground supper clubs may be just right for you. ADVERTISEMENT

"Underground" refers to the clubs' covert nature, not to subterranean dining. They are member-only dinners, held in secret locations like lofts, warehouses, farms or private homes, with the actual address revealed a day or a few hours before the meal. Hosts often lead their guests to locations via scavenger hunt. Some eschew restaurant-culture, some emulate it, but everyone who goes loves good food. The best ones, like Supper Underground (SUG) of Austin, Texas, are a cross between a fine restaurant and a casual dinner party, with an ever-changing roster of addresses. Think of it as a culinary speakeasy.

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SUG's monthly dinners are invitation-only. The address is sent out the day before the dinner and guests find out what they're eating when you arrive. This entire moveable feast is orchestrated and cooked by amateur chefs, SUG founder [Hannah Calvert](#) and her partner, Taylor Hall.

Underground supper clubs are generally credited to controversial chef, Michael Hebb. A culinary renegade who spurned the conventional restaurant scene, Hebb turned the act of eating into an extreme event, once hosting an underground dinner on an island in the middle of a freeway. Inspired by Hebb, Calvert created her own kinder, gentler version with an emphasis on seasonal food, spontaneity, and socializing.

Both Calvert and Hall have full-time day-jobs, she as a corporate consultant and he as a private caterer. Calvert started SUG in 2006 with just 50 invitations and a website. Eighteen people responded. She now has a list of 2000 regulars, all by word-of-mouth.

Calvert created SUG because she enjoys the alchemy of cooking. "I love taking raw ingredients and creating a finished product that looks and smells amazing," she says. SUG lets her take a chef's pleasure in pleasing people's palates and pride in making people feel good. "As I'm cooking, I'm thinking about how all the guests are going to experience the food I'm making. How it will hopefully make them happy and comfortable in a way that they can feel at ease."

Her menus have included dishes like Beef Tenderloin with a Roasted Jalapeno and Smoked Pepper Honey Relish and Truffle Potato Croquette, Scallop Cakes with Potato and Celery Root Puree and a Cilantro Lime Remoulade and Molten Chocolate Lava Cake with Vanilla Ice Cream. Clearly, diners experience much more than an average home-cooked meal.

Calvert sends an email six days before a dinner, giving people twenty-four hours to respond. She sorts through 100 to 150 responses and emails the thirty who will attend. All they know is that they'll get a four-course meal and that it won't be like eating at a restaurant. "It's a totally different experience. At a restaurant it's all about separate tables. Here you meet and really connect with people," she says.

That's why she like doesn't allow groups of five or six which can monopolize a dinner and always includes singles as she says they add a lot to the dynamic. SUG's social aspect is critical. She sees the love and

consumption of fine food at her dinners as the catalyst that turns strangers into friends.

Once they chose a location, Calvert and Taylor supply the food, flowers, flatware, linens and china. Nothing is required of guests other than their presence. And a little of their cash. A voluntary donation is requested to cover the cost of food, and a bowl is circulated and money collected. The couple have always made their money back.

Comfort foods are Calver's forte, "soups, risotto, gnocchi, crab cakes, roasted vegetables, braised meats and desserts. I love the fall and winter months in Austin because it's cool enough to cook heartier dishes but temperate enough to eat outside." She buys primarily from farmer's markets and characterizes her cooking as nouveau American cuisine, with a big emphasis on seafood.

Among her favorite dinners was one this past September at an Austin home with two outside decks. She served [Pan Seared Tilapia](#) with Israeli Couscous, Toasted Almonds and Lump Crab, followed by a Lavender Crusted Lemon Tartlet for dessert. "The sun was setting and everything had this glow. The dinner and cocktails were on two separate decks. The crowd got along and conversation was steady all night. Just perfect all around."

Despite her evident joy and success, Calvert has no plans to cook full-time. First, she loves her day job. Second, with only one dinner party a month she doesn't have to devote all of her energy toward it. The infrequency and the air of mystery make each dinner as much of an event for her as for her guests. And as long as it's fun, she'll keep cooking.

If you want to join the adventure, search "underground supper clubs" for information on clubs in your area, and you might get lucky.

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